

# My Son Won't Call Me Mommy

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“Da da da da da da da,” chants my toddler from the moment he wakes up until the moment he closes his eyes — or until he spies a monkey. Or a bus. Or a book. Then he chants “monkey monkey monkey,” “bus bus bus,” “book book book.”

“Varoom” is his word for motorcycle, “put-put” his word for tractor. He says “baaaa” for sheep and goats, “screech” for taxis, “shoes” for shoes. He’s crazy for bubbles, both the word and the effervescent spheres. As for me — the person who gave him life *and* controls the supply of Cheerios — I am nameless.

I don’t get a “Ma,” let alone a “Mama.” I’m not “Mummy” or “Mother,” “Mami,” or “Amma.” I’d be fine with Jess, which is what my friends call me, or some child-specific mash-up like “Jesma” (Jess + Mama) or “Moss” (Mom + Jess). But, nope, he’s not interested in giving me a matronymic of any kind. According to language experts, my young son needs to hear some 30 million words in the next few years to be prepared for school and beyond. I only need to hear one.

Baby mastered “Dada” at around 8 months, right on schedule. A few months later came words like “ball,” “more,” and “eat.” At daycare, he learned “uh-oh,” a phrase he now utters both before and after throwing a forkful of peas on the floor.

At 21 months, he continues to babble a bunch. Much of it is delightful and intelligible, from “moon” to “wawa” to “bowl.” Despite the fact that we don’t own a TV, he knows “Elmo.” Despite the fact that his maternal grandmother lives 1,200 miles away, he knows “Mimi.” But not “Mommy.”

Having agreed upon terms means we can be a part of someone’s experience of the world. Anyone who’s ever struggled in another language can attest to the sense of accomplishment that comes from making yourself understood, even if it’s only to order a *café au lait* or find *el baño*. And anyone who’s ever been in love knows how deliciously isolating it can be to have a shared lingo.

Perhaps Baby doesn’t have a word for me because he doesn’t yet know we’re separate beings. He doesn’t name me because he doesn’t have to. I’m just there, like air. I am choosing to see this as a sign of my aptitude in meeting his needs, rather than as a sign that his ego is becoming bigger than North America.

